

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 503

CS 212 425

AUTHOR Cauldwell, Brit N.
TITLE Made in Hong Kong: An Imperialist Rhetoric and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.
PUB DATE 11 Jul 90
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing (Indiana, PA, July 10-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); *Ethnocentrism; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language of Instruction; *Language Role; Memorization; Reader Text Relationship; *Rhetorical Criticism; Student Attitudes; *Student Needs; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Cultural Hegemony; *Educational Criticism; *Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Hong Kong education is based on an imperialist rhetoric which serves to "domesticate" rather than "liberate" the school population. The importance of memorization is clearly evident in education in Hong Kong. The community's educational system reflects a classical Chinese emphasis on familiarity with a set body of texts and on a rigorous public education system. English is used as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong schools from the late primary grades through the university. The use of English in instruction prohibits the development of a liberated consciousness among Hong Kong students, and the Eurocentric rhetoric of the English-language textbooks has a domesticating effect. An imperialist rhetoric of memorization and examination allows students little time for free exploration, and the Eurocentric rhetoric of the textbooks constricts students' ability to make their own world with their own voices and in their own ways. Teachers can help students find their own voices by: (1) removing English composition textbooks from the classroom; (2) promoting collaborative learning; (3) utilizing local literature; and (4) allowing students to set the parameters by which their writing is judged. A new "Hong Kong-centric" rhetoric may give students the liberating voice to create their own post-imperialist rhetoric. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SG)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

02

ED322503

Made in Hong Kong:

An Imperialist Rhetoric and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Brit N. Cauldwell

July 11, 1990

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

CS212425

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

BRIT N. CAULDWELL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

Introduction

Two Cantonese expressions capture well the character of Hong Kong education: tihn ngaap sik ge gauh sik (that is, "stuff-a-duck education system") and gam ji tahp ge gauh sik (that is, "pyrimid-shaped education system"). A preliminary examination of what these two terms mean and how they shape the educational system of Hong Kong will serve as an important foundation for the thesis of this paper: namely, that Hong Kong education in general and English-medium education in particular are based on an imperialist rhetoric which, in Freirian (1973) terms, serves to "domesticate" rather than to "liberate" the school population.

Though a cliché, it is probably at least somewhat true that Asian students are known for their prodigious ability to memorize. As Matalene (1985) explains, the value of memorization among Chinese students is partly rooted in the very complex task of learning their written language. Chinese uses an ideographic-based writing system in which each word or concept is represented by one or more ideograms known as characters. Though there are a set number of smaller components (known as radicals) making up individual characters, learning written Chinese is a task that requires an enormous amount of memory work.

This emphasis on memorization is clearly evident in education in Hong Kong. For example, teachers give great importance to memorizing stroke order when students write

Chinese characters. The ability to memorize and recite verbatim is also valued as students are studying Chinese or English texts. Modern education in Hong Kong is greatly influenced by the classical Chinese emphasis on an intimate familiarity with a set body of texts. The ability to memorize and to recite is a highly valued approach in education. Taken to its extreme--and I know personally of many instances when it has been--teachers value memorization so much that examinations often consist of little more than students memorizing long passages of their textbooks and then rewriting them from memory at test time. In Hong Kong the necessity of memorizing large amounts of information has led people to dub the Hong Kong system as the "stuff-a-duck educational system."

Another way in which classical Chinese education has influenced Hong Kong is in the rigorous public examination system, a relative of the Chinese imperial examination system through which civil servants were chosen in pre-revolutionary China. Beginning with an entrance examination to kindergarten, the lives and hopes of students and their parents revolve around passing public examinations. One result, and some would say the only purpose, of such examinations is to insure that most students are forced out of school and into the workforce when, if not before, they complete secondary school. The further students progress through the grade levels of school, the fewer the number of

students who pass the public examinations and are thus allowed to continue with their education. At present, only about seven percent of all students in Hong Kong are given places in Hong Kong universities. Though that number is scheduled to double by 1995, the Hong Kong educational system is one that is shaped like a pyramid: the further students progress towards university-level education, the keener the competition for the rapidly decreasing number of places.

The Role of English in Hong Kong Education

English is used as the medium of instruction in the vast majority of Hong Kong schools from late primary through university. Though there are perennial calls for mother tongue education from some members of the public and the Department of Education, parents and many business concerns are mostly unanimous in their demands for English-medium instruction. Recent attempts to institute mother tongue education have been largely unsuccessful. Only two years after one of Hong Kong's most prestigious secondary schools instituted Cantonese-medium instruction, the school was forced to re-institute English-medium instruction because of a lack of Chinese-language materials and a drastic reduction in the number of applications from top students.

The problems accompanying the use of English-medium instruction in Hong Kong are legion. Most observers agree

that although students study the English language and study through the English language from their earliest school years, the level of English proficiency among the vast majority of students is unsatisfactorily low. There are, of course, a number of reasons for this: For example, most students live in an acquisition poor environment; classes are so large (40 or more students per classroom, in some cases) that students have little opportunity to use and practice the language; and many students are never encouraged to use the language in a meaningful way. English is primarily a school language used for school purposes. The educational system does not encourage, and examination pressures rarely allow, students to use the English language to make meaning for themselves or to explore a critical understanding of their lives.

The cynic and the social critic might claim that English-medium education and the Chinese imperial system of memorization and examination are maintained for one reason: that students remain voiceless, domesticated, and neutralized so that they don't have a language with which to critically examine and "remake their world" (Freire, 1973). I would not be the first to suggest that what the power structures in Hong Kong desire is a small educated elite at the top of society and a large, domesticated, cheap workforce underneath. As long as workers know enough of the language to take an order in English, to follow directions, or to

paste a "Made In Hong Kong" label right-side-up on a box of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toys manufactured for export, then the educational system has done its part in serving the corporate-industrial machinery.

An Imperialist Rhetoric

Not only does the use of English as the medium of instruction prohibit the development of a liberated consciousness among Hong Kong students, (that is, a consciousness that can speak critically to the structures that frame a society), but the rhetoric in which that language is taught also serves a domesticating rather than a liberating purpose. My experience and acquaintance with the textbooks used in most Hong Kong classrooms lead me to claim that the rhetoric of education in Hong Kong is primarily a Eurocentric rhetoric. Some linguists might argue that using English, a language with European roots, as the medium of instruction dictates that this is necessarily so. I would argue that even when English is used as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong, an imposed Eurocentric rhetoric is not a necessary concomitant. Kachru (1982), Smith (1983) and others have documented the nativization of English and the development of nativized, indigenous English-language rhetorics in several countries of the world where English is

used as a second or additional language. There are Indian, African, and Caribbean literatures in English written in rhetorical forms that deviate in splendid ways from a Eurocentric rhetoric. I will argue below that an indigenous Hong Kong-centric rhetoric is a desirable possibility for Hong Kong. First, however, I want to illustrate how, in my opinion, a Eurocentric rhetoric is imposed on students and how that imposition necessarily impedes the acquisition of English and the development of a voice, a critical consciousness, among students in Hong Kong.

One way in which a Eurocentric rhetoric is maintained in Hong Kong schools is through the use of syllabuses and textbooks, particularly those used for teaching English and English composition, that are written by Western or Western-educated authors promoting a Eurocentric view of the world. In many English composition texts for example, students are instructed to write in a way that some composition specialists might label as typically Western: specifically, a linear-style of development is modelled as well as instruction in the traditional modes of development. Of course, the Eurocentric form of writing required for achieving high marks on the all-important public examinations is another means of imposing and maintaining a Eurocentric rhetoric in Hong Kong classrooms. Students, then, are taught to mimic and memorize the Eurocentric rhetoric, the forms demanded by the system, rather than developing a Hong Kong-

centric rhetoric of their own.

Though an explication of Chinese rhetoric is beyond the scope of this paper, I agree with the growing body of research that suggests there is/are (a) Chinese rhetoric(s) distinct from a Eurocentric rhetoric (note, particularly, Matalene, 1985). Whereas Kaplan's (1966) early work in contrastive rhetoric has been criticized for drawing broad generalizations from a small data base of compositions written by second-language writers of English, recent work examining first-language texts from various countries around the world indicates that there are indeed country- and community-specific rhetorics that vary in specific, quantifiable ways (see, e.g., Bar-lev 1986; Grabe 1987; Hinds 1983; Purves 1986; Purves and Purves 1986). This research affirms my assertion that a Hong Kong-centric rhetoric can be developed and must be encouraged if students are ever to acquire their own voice in English.

The Eurocentric rhetoric of English-medium education in Hong Kong, coupled with the Chinese imperial rhetoric of memorization and examination, denies Hong Kong students a way of knowing themselves and critically examining their world. An imperial rhetoric of memorization and examination allows students little time to explore beyond the parameters of their examination-based syllabus. An imposed Eurocentric rhetoric does not encourage Hong Kong students to be part of a world "in the making" (Freire, 1973), but rather dictates

both a voice and a world view which constrict students' ability to examine and make their own world with their own voices and in their own way. In addition, I would contend that an imposed Eurocentric rhetoric is one of the major impediments to the acquisition of English among Hong Kong students. Requiring students to adopt a foreign language along with a foreign view of the world short-circuits second language acquisition processes. We know, for example, from second language reading research that a successful match between a learners' cultural background and the background knowledge presupposed by a text greatly enhances reading comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold 1987; Gatbonton and Tucker 1971; Johnson 1981; and Steffensen et al. 1979). Students will learn a language that allows them to connect with what they know on their way to discovering what is yet unknown. Imposing a Eurocentric rhetoric is not only an imperialist act but an educational policy that assures that most Hong Kong students will fail.

The most obvious way out of this conundrum is, of course, mother-tongue education or, at a minimum, an informed bi-lingual education policy. However, even if or when such a policy is implemented, English will most likely maintain a great level of importance in Hong Kong education and life. Indeed, English is part and parcel of Hong Kong life and identity, and most citizens of Hong Kong want to maintain the use of English for economic and political purposes. The rush

to further internationalize the territory reflects the desire among many Hong Kong people to maintain at least some separateness from China after 1997, when autonomy over the territory reverts to China. Some people see the maintenance of the English language as political leverage with which Hong Kong can counter a feared dominance by Beijing. They believe that English can serve in maintaining the territory's ties to the international community.

Toward a Solution: A Hong Kong-Centric Rhetoric

Of course the question that begs to be asked is what, then, is an English teacher to do in order to move students toward a Hong Kong-centric rhetoric that they themselves create. But before attempting an answer to that question, there is a more basic and difficult question that I must address. That is, as an outsider, a guest, a Eurocentric North American, what right do I have to ask these questions, to raise these issues, or to suggest solutions for the problems I have examined?

I certainly will not deny but affirm that teaching English is a political act, and that being part of the Hong Kong educational system is not always a comfortable position politically to find myself in. I can't but question some times if it would not be better for me to withdraw from

teaching English in Hong Kong altogether and to return home where teaching English is seemingly less of an imperialist act.

There is, of course, no easy accomodation or answer to this conflict. As a guest on a visa that can be as easily revoked as extended, I realize that there is little I can do to change the macro-structure of the Hong Kong education system. To do nothing, however, would be to give in to despair and to be party to perpetuating a system that more often imprisons students rather than setting them free. Though not entirely satisfactory, I have settled on the following actions that I can take in my classroom in helping students to speak in their own voices through their own Hong Kong-centric rhetoric:

1. English composition textbooks have to be removed from the classroom. The way of knowing (see Belensky et al.) modelled in these textbooks is Eurocentric and foreign to Hong Kong students (and probably students everywhere). It is possible, of course, that elements of a Eurocentric rhetoric will be incorporated into a Hong Kong-centric rhetoric. To prescribe such a rhetoric, however, is to prescribe silence.

2. Collaborative learning (Gere 1987) must be at the very core of the composition classroom. This is a radically political move in a teacher-fronted system--a system that views teachers and textbooks as repositories of knowledge that students gain access to and then memorize. To

encourage dialogue among students, to place them at the center of their own community of meaning- and rhetoric-makers is revolutionary and is the only way students will ever have the opportunity of discovering and creating their own voice.

3. In teaching literature or reading classes, recent suggestions for utilizing localized literature in the ESL classroom should be followed. This means tapping the small but growing corpus of English literature written by Asian writers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere throughout Asia. Nothing is sacred about the canons of Western literature.

4. Finally, students should be encouraged to set the parameters by which their writing will be judged, and the teacher should do whatever is possible to remove the teacher-as-evaluator from the classroom dynamic. I don't know what a Hong Kong-centric rhetoric will look like, and even if I had ideas of what it might look like, I don't have the right to impose my voice, my rhetoric, or my opinions on my students.

I believe these steps have the potential of freeing Hong Kong students to find their own voice, their own rhetoric with which to critique the world that is and create the world that can be. I can't presume to know what that voice will sound like or what form that rhetoric will take. What I can do is encourage and listen and hope that someday, rather than working in sweltering factories manufacturing the toys of Western society, such as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,

a Hong Kong-centric rhetoric will give students the liberating voice to create a post-imperialist rhetoric that is uniquely their own: One that may seem just as strange and other-worldly to us as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles seem to them.

References

- Bar-lev, Z. (1986). Discourse theory and "contrastive rhetoric." Discourse Processes, 9.
- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R., & Tarule, J.M. (1986). Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind. New York: Basic Books.
- Carrell, P.L., & Eisterhold, J.C. (1987). Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. In M. Long & J. Richards (Eds.), Methodology in TESOL (pp. 218-232). Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.
- Freire, P. (1973). Education for critical consciousness. New York: Continuum.
- Gathbonton, E. & Tucker, G. (1971). Cultural orientation and the study of foreign literature. TESOL Quarterly, 5.
- Gere, A. R. (1987). Writing groups: History, Theory, and implications. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Grabe, W. (1987). Contrastive rhetoric and text-type research. In U. Connors & R. Kaplan (Eds.), Writing Across Languages (pp. 115-137). New York: Longman.
- Hinds, J. (1983). Contrastive rhetoric: Japanese and English. Text, 3.
- Johnson, P. (1981). Effects on reading comprehension of language complexity and cultural background of a text. TESOL Quarterly, 15.
- Kachru, B. (1980). The other tongue: English across cultures. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Kaplan, R.B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. Language Learning, 16.
- Matalene, C. (1985). Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China. College English, 47.
- Purves, A.C. (1986). Rhetorical communities, the international student, and basic writing. Journal of Basic Writing, 5.
- Purves, A.C. & Purves, W.C. (1986). Viewpoints: Cultures, text models, and the activity of writing. Research in the Teaching of English, 20.

Smith, L. (ed.) (1983). Readings in English as an international language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Steffensen, M., Joag-Dev, C. & Anderson, R. (1979). A cross-cultural perspective on reading comprehension. Reading Research, 15.